

[Turpentine Man]

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Life Histories

Complete

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History of R. W. Wishart

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LIFE HISTORY OF

C. W. WIMSTER, TURPENTINE MAN

"Yeah, man. I was bawn in a turpentine camp, spent near about forty years in the business, and woulda been in it yet if the bottom hadn't-a dropped out of it. I've soaked up so much turpentine in my life that if you run me through a still right now, I reckon you'd git about ten gallon outa me."

The speaker, a 40-year old veteran of the turpentine woods, chuckled at this jest as he sat on the front porch of his weathered one-story home in an old residential part of Tampa. He stretched his long wiry frame in the porch rocker, ran long fingers through a shock of wavy brown hair, and his level gray eyes took on a [reminescent?] look as though gasing back

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through the endless vistas of [gum-exuding?] pines that had been the scene of his life. He went on!

“When I say I was bawn in a turpentine camp I mean jist that. My father was manager of a 20-crop naval stores place, an we lived in the camp near Eastman, Georgia, an I was bawn right in the camp in 1899. There was six children of us, an as soon as us boys was old enough we shore had to work, helpin around the still or the commissary, or work as water boys. When I was about two years old my folks moved to another camp at Bay Lake, Florida.

“I started to school there when I was six, in a little one-room log schoolhouse in the woods. I started in the turpentine business as a water boy when I was eight, an finally worked myself up to manager of eight camps at [\$230?] a month.

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“My folks believed in education, an I was sent to school regular when I was a boy, but worked in the summers. When I was about ten years old we moved to a camp at Martin, seven miles from Ocala, an I was promoted to talley “man”—keeping tally on the number of tress boxed or streaked by each nigger. Niggers do all the labor in the woods, an most of the work around the still. The manager, foreman, commissary men and woods riders are all white men. At each camp there will be from 50 to 200 niggers, accordin to the number of “crops” worked. A crop is about 10,000 trees.

“The white folks live in fairly good homes at one side of the camp, and the niggers in their quarters at the other side in two-or three-room cabins or board houses. We always aimed to have separate quarters for the single niggers to keep them from messin up with the married men's wives. But this didn't always work, and there was many a fight on account uv them mixin at night in the woods.

“By the time I was 12 years old I began to learn how to make boxes an streaks, an do everything else in the woods an at the still. A box is a deep cut in the tree to ketch the

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gum, an streaks are shallow gutters out in the trunk of the tree to lead the gum down into the box. In late years most turpentine men use cups attached to the tree to ketch the sap or gum, instead of the deep boxes they used to cut. The cup system makes the trees last longer. The dip squad travels through the woods with a team or truck loaded with barrels into which they collect the gum, an then haul it to the still to be refined into spirits of turpentine. The gum is about as thick as thick syrup, and when heated the rosin settles to the bottom of the still, and is drawed off hot into barrels.

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“When I was about 13 years old I started to ride the woods, an was foreman of the dippin squad. I rode three crops, an that was a man's work. About 1914, when I was around 15, we moved to Loraine, Manatee County, about 12 miles from Bradenton. At this camp the boss thought I was too young to ride, so he give me a job as talley man and inspector of box cuttin. By this time I was an expert box cutter myself, and could tell the niggers how to do it right. If a box aint cut exactly right its no good at all. I worked part of a year there, an then got a job guardin convicts in a turpentine place at Punta Gorda.

“All this time I was goin to school in the winter, and when I was 16 years old I graduated from high school at Ocala. Next I got a job as manager for Mr. Hamp Lowther who had a 30-crop place at Verna, Florida. There I worked in the commissary some, an worked as woodsman, ridin one ride, besides actin as manager. I worked there and at other camps till I joined the army and went to France in 1917. After the armistice I came to Tampa. Then in 1919 I got the idea I could get rich raisin canaloupes, so went to Ocala and tried it a year an lost \$500 I had saved. My cantaloupe crop was a plum failure. So I decided I'd better stick to turpentine.”

It will be noted that Mr. Wimster's speech varied at times from rural Florida dialect to the better diction of his high school influence.

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"In 1920 I went to work as over-rider over eight woodsmen on a 100-crop job at Nalaca, Florida, but there came a slump in 4 the price of turpentine and the force at this place was out to about nothing, includin me; so I left there and the next year when the market picked up a little I got another job, as foreman of a 40-crop place at Miakka. Another drop in the price of turps laid me off there in 1922. Up to then I hadn't had much time to think about gittin married, but now, with nothing else to do, I remembered a nice gal I'd met in Polk County, so I went a-courtin up there an married her. Then I got a job as manager at Camp Four in Polk County, for Mr. W. C. French.

"In 1922, I think it was, I was offered a better job, as manager of eight camps owned by a New York concern at Opal, Okeechobee County. This was a big virgin woods in low, swampy country, and the outfit was a big one of 120 crops. There I had charge of 400 niggers and nine woodsmen (riders). I got \$250 a month and held that job for two years. Then come the damdest rainy season I ever saw in Florida. It poured down for weeks, and water stood knee deep all over the woods. We had to set around in camp and do nothing. There was 400 heada niggers an 30 heada horses an mules eatin up rations, an besides the wet weather made the horses and mules backs all sore so we couldn'ta worked on anyhow. I shore had a mess of trouble on my hands. An to make everything worse the big bosses in New York kept telegraphin me an wantin to know why no production. Finally I got mad an told em to go to hell an git somebody else, an I walked and waded off the job.

"Next I worked a while an manager of a 30-crop job at Camp Cook, near Panama City. All this time, remember, the price of turpentine 5 kept goin down, an that was mostly the reason I changed jobs so much. Whenever the demand for naval stores got slack the operators would shut down or cut wages. Substitutes for turps and rosin were comin on the market, and besides many plants had began to distill the product from stumps and lighterd knots. This cheap stuff made it almost impossible to operate a regular turpentine business at a profit.

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"By the latter part of 1924 I had some money saved, so I went to Spring Park, Marion County, and bought me a 10-crop turpentine place of my own, and 200 acres of farm land. Then the Florida boom begun, and my laborers all left and went to the cities or up North where they could git higher wages. I could't make a livin on my place, so I quit and went to road contractin for a while. Then from 1926 to the latter part of 1932 I worked for Aycock & Lindsay, big Florida turpentine men, as manager and later as top rider over all their camps in Dixon County. In 1934 the price of naval stores again hit bottom, and I went to Venus, Florida, as superintendent of a logging camp.

"In 1937 I heard that the government of Haiti wanted an experienced turpentine and timber man to survey the pine forests of that country for possible sources of turpentine and lumber, and I sent in my application along with fine letters of recommendation I had from the leading turpentine and lumber companies of Florida. There were a lot of other applicants, but I got the job and went to Haiti in 1937 to take up that work.

"When I got to Port-au-Prince, the capital, the government furnished me with a military escort, guides, camping equipment, 6 laborers, and everything necessary to explore and survey the immense forests there. The timber resources there were practically undiscovered and undeveloped. In two trips I spent about two years there in all, and discovered approximately 22,000,000 acres of good turpentine producing timber, absolutely virgin, and of such growth that most of the trees will cut 12x12 timbers 50 to 70 feet long. I established a turpentine still there and it is now in commercial production."

As he told of these accomplishments, the Florida turpentine expert rose and paced the floor in enthusiasm. His eyes glowed with a discoverer's [fervor?]. His rather fine profile lit up with intelligent interest in his subject, as he continued:

"They don't know what they've got down there! There's millions of dollars in the finest virgin timber, and with labor at 20 cents a day they can produce naval stores to compete even with the cheap synthetic substitutes."

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When asked about the home life of the Negroes in the Florida turpentine camps, Mr. Wimster smiled, relaxed, and again became the “boss man” of the resinous Florida woods:

“Turpentine niggers are a class by themselves. They are different from town niggers, farm laborers or any other kind. Mostly they are born and raised in the camps, and don't know much about anything else. They seldom go to town, and few of them ever saw the inside of a school house. In nearly every camp there is a jack-leg preacher who also works in the woods, and they usually have church services on Sunday at one or another of their houses.

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And every camp has its ‘jook’, as they are now called, but the original name of this kind of a joint was a ‘tunk’. This is a house where the men and women gather on Saturday nights to dance, drink moonshine, gamble and fight. Between dances or drinks, young couples stroll off into the woods and make love.

“The supreme authority in a camp is the foreman. To the niggers he is the law, the judge, jury and executioner. He even ranks ahead of God to these people. In speakin to him they all call him ‘Cap's’. Among themselves they call him ‘the Man’. An believe me, he better be a man fum the ground up. If he ever stands for any back talk or shows a streak of yellow he's through, an might as well quite. For they lose all respect for him and won't mind him. Even though they keep up a pretense of respect to his face, they'll laugh at him behind his back and gang up to make his life so miserable he'll soon have to leave. They like to be ruled by an iron hand an no velvet glove.

“Seems like I always had a knack of handlin labor. Bein bawn an raised with turpentine niggers I learned their nature. They all liked me because I was fair and firm, an they'd do anything for me. If I quit a job and went to another, ever last nigger on the place would follow me if I told em to.

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"Most camps are so deep in the woods that law officers don't bother em much. Outside of murder, the officers usually leave it up to the camp foreman to make and enforce his own laws. At least that's the way it used to be. In the old days there were very few legal marriages or divorces. For the sake of good camp government ⁸ and economy in housing, it was to the interest of the foreman to see that all unattached men and women got 'sarried' to each other. This was done by what the workers called a 'commissary weddin'. The foreman was a purty good match maker, and when it was decided between him and a couple that they should 'sarry up with each other', they simply went to the commissary and were assigned a house, and an account for rations and clothing was opened for the pair. Then they took their supplies to the house given them and began house-keepin together. This was a 'commissary marriage'. Once in a great while, when a couple had some extra money and wanted to put on style, they/ would have a 'cotehouse' marriage. That is, they would go to the courthouse at the county seat, get what they call a 'pair o' licenses', and be legally married."

An incident brought to mind by Mr. Wimster's account of these marriages was told the writer in 1916 by J. A. Stevens, foreman of a turpentine camp in the backwoods of [Manatee?] County. About fifty Negro couples in the camp had long lived together there without benefit of "cotehouse" or clergy. One aged pair had been married by commissary wedlock and lived together happily for more than fifty years, and had raised a large family of grown children. Somehow a white preacher from the North heard of this unholy state at the camp and made such loud complaint that county officials finally, and perhaps reluctantly, issued orders that the Negro couples must be legally married or cease living together. As a result, Mr. Stevens said, he had to pay for some fifty marriage licenses in a bunch and hold a "mass wedding" in which all the commissary-wed couples ⁹ were legally united in one grand ceremony. To the Negroes it meant nothing but a big adventure and a gay holiday, he said.

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When asked about feuds between bosses at different camps over recruiting each other's labor, Mr. Wimster chuckled reminiscently and said:

"Sure, we was always tryin to steal laborers from each other. All of us did it; sometimes just for fun, and sometimes because we needed em. We got right mad sometimes, but there was never any shootin. I remember one time when I was foreman of a camp in Polk County. You see, the great pastime of all turpentine niggers is gamblin, mostly playin 'skin'. This is purely a nigger's game, played with ordinary cards. Well, one Saturday night after pay day forty of my men was playin skin, when one of the owners of our outfit, a northern man, came to camp and saw em. He said nothing to me, but next day in Bartow he told the sheriff to ooze out to camp and arrest them for gamblin. They were all taken to town, fined \$35 each and jailed. My boss refused to pay their fines, so they sent one of my niggers to a rival camp to indirectly drop a hint that the foreman could get these 40 men by paying their fines an takin em. He fell for it, an hurried to town where he paid em all out an started em to his camp. It was Christmas time, an he staid in town an went on a big spree for several days.

"I met the gang on their way to his camp, and said: 'Hey, you niggers, come on back home an go to work, an I'll see you ain't bothered no more about gamblin.' They all whooped for joy, an followed me back an went to work again for me. A week or so 10 later I met the man that paid their fines, an said to him, 'How's tricks?' He was lookin mighty glum, an said: 'Rotten as hell. Whilst I was celebratin Christmas some dam son of a bitch stole 40 good niggers from me, an they cost me \$35 a head, I wisht I could find out who got em.'

"I sympathized with him plenty, an it was weeks afterward before he found out it was me got his hands. By that time he had stole somebody else's niggers and got over his mad, so when we met we jist joked about it.

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“Yes, them was the days, but I reckon they're gone for good. The turpentine business is done for in this country, an I don't think it will ever come back. Me? I's goin back to Haiti soon, an maybe I'll stay there.”